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| History of Modern Photography in Korea (Late 19th century-1940s) |
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| Although photography was first introduced to Korea in the early 1880s, it failed to become widespread because of the unstable political situation. As such, Korean photographic culture was initially led by Japanese photographers with studios in Korea, until artist and calligrapher Kim Gyu-jin (1868-1933) opened Cheonyeondang Studio in 1907. Art photography only began to develop in the 1920s and 30s, thanks to a greater supply of smaller cameras, an increase in the number of amateur photographers, the invigoration of photography groups, and photography contest exhibitions organized by newspapers. |
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Thus, art photography was roundly criticized as a derivative technique that simply imitated paintings and was alienated from reality. Nonetheless, the art photography movement of the Japanese colonial era is historically significant for providing the first opportunity for Koreans to recognize that photography, rather than merely reproducing images, could be used as a tool for expressing a person’s individual subjectivity.  Korea began to adopt photographic technology in the early 1880s, seeing photography as a way to empower the nation. Early photographers Kim Yong-won (1842-1891), Ji Un-yeong (1852-1935), and Hwang Cheol (1864-1930) purchased cameras in Japan or China and opened studios in Seoul. However, due to the domestic and international political turmoil of the time, the photographic styles and methods of these pioneers failed to gain a foothold. Korean photography, during this period, was therefore led by Japanese commercial photographers, such as Murakami Tenshin (1867-?) and Iwata Kanae (1867-?), until the opening of Cheonyeondang Studio.  During the rise of Korean art photography in the 1920s and 30s, ‘art photography’ came to refer to a specific style of photography heavily influenced by Pictorialism, which became popular among Japanese amateur photographers who had been introduced to the work of English photographer Peter H. Emerson in the 1890s. The concept and practice of art photography was translated by the Japanese, and then introduced to Korea. Korean ‘art photography’, which differentiated itself from commercial photography and appeared as a comprehensive concept incorporating photography as a hobby, photography as a medium of subjective expression, and photography as avant-garde experimentation.  Shin Nak-gyun (1899-1955) finished his studies at the Tokyo Photography School in 1927 and returned to Korea, where he taught in the YMCA Photography Department. Shin published photography books, including *Introduction to Photography* (1928), and gave lectures introducing and popularizing the pigment print technique. The first Korean photographer to hold an art photography exhibition was Jeong Hae-chang (1905-1964) in 1929. The son of a wealthy pharmacist in Seoul, Jeong took up amateur photography and held at least four solo exhibitions between 1929-1939. Around 500 of his art photos have survived. Jeong also conducted various experiments combining photography with Korean art traditions. For example, he used a photo to make a folding screen, like Korean traditional painting, and also mounted photos into fans or circles.  Leisure culture continued to develop among the urban middle class of the 1930s, leading to a rise in the number of amateur photographers. Newspapers began organizing photographic events, such as the Joseon Photography Salon (1934-43) by Gyeongseong Ilbo andSummer Landscape Photography Salon (1937-1940) by Chosun Ilbo, offering a welcome opportunity for amateur photographers to display their work. Indeed, most of the representative photographers of early modern Korean photography debuted in such photo contests. Generally known as ‘salon photography’, the art photography of these contests consisted largely of idyllic rural landscapes eliciting poetic sensations. The style was defined by its use of soft focus, the balance between light and gradation, and its spatial composition, with a low horizon and wide spread of space. Representative works include *Rural Landscape* (1939) by Yi Hyeong-rok (1917-2011) and *Sunny Place* (1935) by Limb Eung -Sik (1912-2001).  By the late 1930s, more experimental photography began to emerge, under the influence of Pictorialism, as well as avant-garde photography, such as Surrealism, German New Objectivity, and the photograms of László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray. A representative example of this trend is *Pocket Watch* (1930s) by Bak Pil-ho (1903-1981). However, in Korea, avant-garde photography drew more interest from artists, such as Yoo Young-kuk (1916-2002) and Jo U-sik (dates unknown), than from amateur photographers, and thus failed to develop into a full-fledged movement. The avant-garde movement was hindered by the fact that many Korean photographers were forced by the Japanese to produce war propaganda photography, as the Pacific War ramped up starting in the late 1930s. |
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